



Second Sunday of Easter
Rev. Jonathan Stepp
April 28, 2019
John 20:19-31

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Many years ago, when Emily was about 3 or 4 years old, I was working late in my home office in the place where we lived in Nashville. The room was dark except for the blue haze of my computer screen bathing me in light as I typed away, absorbed in thought about what I was writing. Suddenly, I had that strange awareness where you know that someone is behind you even though you haven't heard any sounds. I swiveled my chair around and there stood Emily, but all my eyes saw for a brief moment was a pale demon-child in a nightgown bathed in an eerie light. For just one split second I was startled by her unexpected presence and I let out a cry of horror, which caused her to scream in surprise, which then caused me to cry out again, which then caused her to start crying!

Of course, it was all over in an instant, but it was interesting afterwards to think about how easy it is to misunderstand what's happening and experience irrational fear.

I think that's a little bit of where the disciples were on the evening after Jesus' resurrection, as we hear in John's account today. They were hiding in a house with the doors locked because they were afraid of their fellow citizens. In one sense their feelings are probably understandable – after all, it's only been three days since those fellow citizens were crying out “crucify him!” I can imagine what fearful scenarios were playing out in their minds about who the people of Jerusalem might seek out and kill next.

Of course, their fear also reflects a lack of understanding on their part about how scapegoating and lynchings work. Once the mob has found its innocent scapegoat and lynched him, the desire to pour out their rage on an innocent person has been satisfied. It will be a while before their sinful hatred and violence seeks again to be appeased by the blood of an innocent victim. The bigger part of the picture they are missing, however, is the reality that the nature of existence itself has been changed – Jesus has conquered death and risen from the

grave. That changes everything and it makes the fear of the disciples somewhat inappropriate. Understandable, perhaps, but still not appropriate to the beauty and grace of what has just happened in Jesus' resurrection.

Among the many, many ways that Jesus' conquest of death changes everything is this: we are now absolutely assured that making the world a better place doesn't depend entirely on us. Sometimes crucifixions will happen and even if we – like Peter on Maundy Thursday – draw our swords and start lopping off people's ears, we may not be able to stop bad stuff from happening. Our hope is that our hard work combined with God's gracious love for us, as revealed in the power of the resurrection, is what will make the world a better place. We are not alone in our struggle to for goodness. God is on our side and God will intervene to help.

In an Easter sermon back in 2012, Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, talked about the reality of this good news of God at work in our world. He said that believing everything doesn't depend on us delivers us from a deadly temptation, the temptation to “be consumed by anxiety that we haven't done enough, so consumed that we never have time to be ourselves, to give God thanks for his love and grace and beauty.”¹

I find his imagery in that sermon compelling. He warns us against anxiety that causes us to never have the time to be ourselves. That's where the disciples were on the Easter Sunday evening so long ago – so consumed by fear and anxiety that they ceased to be themselves, they had almost ceased to even be human, they were just bundles of fear crouching behind locked doors. And, as Williams says, they were so consumed by anxiety that they didn't even have time to give God thanks for the greatest demonstration of his love and grace and beauty that had ever been offered: the resurrection of Christ.

We can see such anxiety in many places in our lives. We worry about what others might think or say about us, we fear the medical problem that is not yet diagnosed but may be coming, and we fear the unknown and unnamed dangers that lurk out there somewhere, keeping us awake at night. Fear can consume us as individuals, it can stop churches from being places of life and joy that fulfill their mission, it can divide communities and tear them apart from within, and it can even lead whole nations to disastrous policies, diplomatic actions, and wars.

No wonder Jesus repeated word to the disciples that evening and to us, on this second Sunday of Easter, was the simple phrase: “Peace be with you.” In that phrase Christ is summarizing the good news message from God to us that is revealed in the resurrection. The good news that we are not alone. The good news that every-

thing doesn't depend on us. The good news that God is at work in our lives and in the world. The good news that he is risen, alleluia!

¹ Williams, Rowan. *Choose Life: Christmas and Easter Sermons in Canterbury Cathedral*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013. pg. 205.